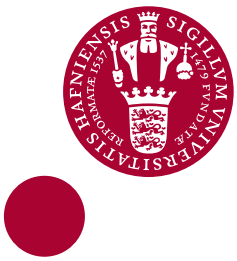

Indigeneity and precariousness

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Luisa Steur

INDIGENEITY AND PRECARIOUSNESS: ONTOLOGICAL CRITICISM OR DIALECTICAL FORCE?

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This piece, briefly, will argue that in studying and supporting the many indigenous movements that have emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, a dialectical understanding of political identification processes and global capitalism dynamics is of key importance. I will also lay out how I came to this understanding through a combination of methodological engagement and fieldwork encounters.

In indigenous studies, anthropologists tend to sympathetically engage with the critical messages that indigenous movements articulate, vis-à-vis Western modernity and its epistemology, and give such messages greater intellectual resonance by translating them into an ontological effort to decolonize and particularize our own thinking (e.g., de la Cadena 2010; Blaser 2010). In this framework, when it comes to the question of capitalism, anthropologists often engage this question as another problem of Western ontology, as the cognitive or cultural capture of Western minds—a trend we see repeated in some of the most publicly acclaimed anthropological analyses of the global financial crisis (e.g., Gillian Tett 2010). Likewise, the increasing precariousness that we witness in the neoliberal era (Muehlebach 2013) is taken as an occasion to reflect on deepening emotional-existential human insecurities and the "systematizing" modes of thought (such as the irrepressible desire to theorize capitalism) that evolve to cope with this kind of crisis. In all this, the historical, real, relational process of capitalism is sidestepped, culturalized, or even reduced to a Western myth. The timing and geography of the emergence of indigenist politics in this approach remains a puzzle, and there is an intellectual disengagement regarding the strategic directions that indigenous movements may take.

Of course, not all anthropologists engaged in indigenous studies take an inward-looking turn. Many, in fact, show an interest in the history of global capitalism that forms the backdrop of the rise of indigenous movements. Local histories of the emergence of different indigenous movements and the new communication technologies, networks, and transnational flows that, in friction-ridden ways, unite them, have indeed been studied quite extensively (e.g., Niezen 2003; Hodg-

son 2011). But where not engaged as ontology, the opposite here tends to happen to the study of capitalism, namely the insistence on empiricism. Capitalism is then to be studied by following things—traveling objects or discourses and flows of money and people—to arrive at *novel* insights, so as not to, as Anna Tsing put it, "already [know] what capitalism looks like before we see it" (2004). Having a theory of the relational forces constituting and reproducing a capitalist world system is rejected for risking being "determinist" and "totalizing"—supposed aspects of Marxism that are widely misrecognized and seen as antithetical to anthropology. Pushed into the disciplinary subconscious, then, is the work of Marxian anthropologists, from Eric Wolf to William Roseberry and Peter Worsley, who have contributed to developing and sharpening our understanding of the systemic logics of capitalism as they dialectically work themselves out. and are renegotiated, in people's everyday working lives, organized collectivities, and socially reproductive activities. As I have come to see it, the most important global relational connections involved in shaping, and being shaped by, the rise of indigenism are missed if we focus exclusively on the immediately visible links and ties involved.

It wasn't, however, just methodological considerations that pushed me toward this argument. It was also certain contextual characteristics of the particular indigenous movement I studied: the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. This movement emerged in the late 1990s from the South Indian state of Kerala, known for the historical strength of its communist movement. What I first noticed when doing fieldwork was that the indigenist discourse I encountered among ordinary rank and file of the movement was so obviously a contradictory mix of epistemologies—of legally and "scientifically" prescribed identification, popular revisioning of historical memory, references to differing political ideologies, and attempts to appeal to middle-class imaginaries of indigenousness—that it was difficult to read it as anything like an ontological critique. One moment people would tell me indigenous was "just something the government calls us" and that they were just "poor people," and the next they would claim it was their "culture." In life history interviews, they would talk of their past of being enslaved to the landlords of the area, never having had a place for themselves to live, and, the next moment, they would talk of how the area they were about to occupy was their "ancestral land." Still, in a nascent form, the discourse of indigeneity seemed more the site of a complex process of coming to terms with contradictory pressures on their lives than the ontological critique of Western modernity that many scholars read into it. I became interested in understanding these pressures through a better grasp of political economic change in the region, seen as a set of changing social relations.

"following the thing," as a way to capture the global connections involved in the rise of indigenism in Kerala was, however, a second characteristic of my field, namely that concrete transnational indigenist connections were relatively few. Soon I had interviewed all of the key nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders and activists whom indigenous leaders had been in contact and on international tours with, and they were too few, I felt, to explain the widespread popularity of indigenism among ordinary people. On top of this, because of Kerala's communist history and the historical US-backed intervention by the Indian federal state to remove the first communist government in Kerala from power (in 1959), a certain paranoia existed in Kerala against any political actors from abroad. The indigenous movement I studied in Kerala hence did its best to avoid strong transnational links, as this would have easily delegitimized it locally as being "an agent of imperialism." The transnationalist explanation à la Tsing and others simply did not work in Kerala.

A third characteristic that then reinforced the need for an in-depth engagement with anthropological work on global capitalism was that, in fact, the most easily identifiable empirical outcomes of global capitalism that have spurred indigenous protest elsewhere—accumulation by dispossession in the form of large-scale mining operations, for instance—were absent in Kerala. Social and environmental protections are, because of Kerala's communist history, still more institutionally guaranteed in this state than elsewhere. To proceed, I was thus forced to deepen my understanding of local-global relational dynamics in a capitalist world. Though I lack the space to elaborate on this here (but for example, see Steur 2014), I can briefly mention some anthropological work that helped me do so, including Gerald Sider's work on indigenous struggles within and against histories of uneven capitalist development (1993), Gavin Smith's work on the ascendance of finance capital and the politics of surplus populations (2011), Jonathan Friedman's work on indigenism as part of the double polarization associated with the disintegration of global hegemony (1999), and Don Kalb's approach to "critical junctions" to ethnographically capture shifts in capitalist regimes of production and reproduction (2013).

With this theoretical sensitivity, I observed the working lives of the people involved in the movement I studied, collected their life histories, and gradually came to a better insight into how macro-shifts in the capitalist world system were playing themselves out in the region and indeed forming the backdrop to the emergence of the movement. For the people of the rural slum where I did most of my fieldwork, people who had all participated in the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, ev-

home seemed to be transforming under the specter of precariousness. The pollution and depletion associated with industrial agriculture and the retreat of capital from the plantation sector in Kerala with the liberalization of the Indian economy set the stage for a different, less labor-intensive type of agrarian production, what Münster and Münster describe as "speculative farming" (2012), which includes farmers from Kerala buying up land in other states for the production of potentially highly profitable but also risky cash crops, such as ginger. For the people I worked with, who were all landless agricultural laborers, this meant a less steady demand for their labor in the local economy, so they were forced to live a life of circular migration, spending weeks on end outside of Kerala in search of work.

This precariousness and the feeling of being pushed out of Keralese society, of being made a surplus population, were augmented by the precariousness of their living situation. The land of the rural slum where these people had lived for two generations, in houses that were once the sign of upward mobility but had by now become dilapidated and overcrowded, was becoming ever more valuable as the real estate market was booming. Hence, there were increasing pressures on people in the slum to move—pressures translated in painful ways not directly by external developers but rather by slightly better off kin who were seeking to capture rising land values.

It is in these processes that global capital comes close to the skin and reshapes people's everyday lives in profound ways. It is also here that I found the more convincing explanation of why indigenism with its emphasis on land, local belonging, rootedness, and autonomy would become so popular as people felt their foothold in local society loosen and could no longer imagine a possibility of social integration via established paths. And yet, potentially, the same could have been articulated in the ideology of communism that used to attract many working people in Kerala, including indigenous people. It is here we find a second way world historical processes are involved in the rise of local indigenous movements, namely in what Wallerstein calls "the end of a reformist cycle" (2004). For in Kerala, as elsewhere, it was the communist party, a party erstwhile carrying the "optimism of the oppressed" regarding the possibility of progress and emancipation within the liberal-secular nation-state, that became one of the actors to implement austerity and liberalization measures to manage the competitive pressures of global capital on Kerala's economy. Older generations of indigenous workers often kept remembering communism as the movement that freed them from bonded labor without any violent retaliation from landlords (who often had likewise turned "communist") and still often saw communism as having provided them for the first

nessing precariatization proceeding steadily under communist rule, could only see all of this as a history of cynical reformism and humiliating charity. Also at this level, then, dynamics within global capitalism were changing relational experiences and clearly setting the stage for the popularity of indigenism.

To sum up, the main conclusion that has grown out of a combination of my methodological reflections and fieldwork practice, is that when it comes to studying global indigenism, and the many local indigenous movements that are part of it, anthropologists can do better than follow the banner of ontology or naïve empirical discovery to reject the existing theorizing of the power dynamics in the totality of social relations signaled by global capitalism. Indeed, by building on, rather than rejecting, the anthropological theorizing of the realities of global capitalism and its associated immediate struggles, ethnographic discovery becomes more meaningful, and ontological critique moves from the juxtaposition of Western and other societies to a connective political praxis of labor.

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